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ABSTRACT

School-site management embodies the concept that decisions should be made at the lowest possible level in organizations and intends that no decision be made without the input of those affected by them. The concept also suggests the empowerment of individual units of the system, particularly, the teachers. Centralization versus decentralization is a crucial issue in the school-site management controversy, because a school district cannot move overnight from a highly centralized system to one of school-site management. Several areas are within the sphere of school-site management: (1) school scheduling; (2) instructional delivery; (3) instructional support; (4) curricular alternatives; (5) student wellness; (6) school climate; (7) parent/community involvement; (8) facility cleanliness and security; and (9) financial priorities. A strategy to implement school-site management is presented as well as exemplary programs now working at Kenmore-Tonawanda Schools (Buffalo, New York) and West Potomac High School (Alexandria, Virginia). (3 references) (SI)

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A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

Vol. XVI, No. 2 (ISSN 0192-6160) December 1989

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School-Site Management

School-site management (SSM) is being heralded in some quarters as a new approach to resolving problems in schools and districts bogged down with inertia, tedium, and paperwork.

School-site management is a new name for a very old management idea. Simply put, it embodies the concept that decisions should be made at the lowest possible level in organizations, preferably where they can lead to solutions. Custodial decisions should be made by custodians, instructional decisions in classrooms by teachers, and schoolwide decisions by school principals.

Contemporary school-site management also intends that no decisions be made without the input of those affected by them, and that as many constraints as possible be removed to create maximum conditions for problem solving. Removing as many barriers as possible means that solutions can be initiated from the "bottom up" instead of from the "top down." It does not mean, however, (as some would imply) that all decisions must come from the bottom up, or that a decisions from the top cannot be good or even legitimate.

Some reformers, legislators, policymakers, and professors have become disenchanted with the use of administrative power in schools. They are convinced that those with power have not used it properly, or that current school outcomes (i.e., mediocre test scores) have been caused by faulty use of administrative power. The solution is to pass the power around.

Teacher unions, always on the lookout for new ways to enhance teacher status and welfare, have jumped on this bandwagon, and again proposed one of their pet ideas, the "principal-less" school. Power is to be passed around under the slogan of "empowerment," a word often used in conjunction with school-site management. If teachers are "empowered," schools will not need principals. (To extend the argument, perhaps if principals are empowered, we may not need superintendents, or at least the school district officers now in supervisory positions.)

Much of the current rhetoric ignores the hard realities of public disaffection with education, legislative mandates that increase rather than decrease school centralization, and the impact of state testing programs. These trends reinforce administrative authority as it is now constituted in schools.

School-site management is much more than moving the power pawn around in school districts. SSM means systematically creating more room at all levels for creative problem solving: unlimbering school systems from excessive bureaucratic requirements, buck passing to higher levels, promotion systems that drive out new people and new ideas, and accountability systems that breed paperwork instead of improvement.

The bottom line of school-site management is not who may gain or lose "power." Rather, school-site management enables schools to become more effective in teaching students and enhancing their learning. It is toward improved school effectiveness that site-based management is directed. Enabling, not empowerment, is the issue.

Centralization, Decentralization

The historic shift of resources first to the central level and then back to the field is easily documented

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(Tyack, 1974; Spring, 1986). Each time the debate created an "either-or" situation. When school systems were decentralized in the '60s, the cry was to put the power back into the hands of the people. Unfortunately, the corruption, mismanagement, patronage, and incompetence of local community boards in New York City and some other places led to a re-establishment of central control and authority in the '70s and '80s.

Actually, the question should not be centralization vs. decentralization, but rather which decisions are best made in schools and which ones centrally? At stake is not just a definition of system dynamics, but what is best approached by the resources of the total district, at what level.

In a number of sectors, centralization is likely to remain the best strategy for schools and school systems. These areas would include collective bargaining, desegregation, responses to state testing mandates, technology, and taxation to support schools. Let us explore the reasons.

Centralization

Collective Bargaining. Teacher unions/associations do not bargain with individual schools in a school district. Contracts are signed between the board of education and the union. Contracts apply to all schools, unless some are exempted.

No individual school principal under the banner of "site-based management" or "empowerment" would be allowed to deviate from the contract without permission. To do so would be to risk a grievance and lawsuits for the district. Union contracts are forces of centralization.

Desegregation. Successful desegregation suits have challenged the once sacrosanct supremacy of the neighborhood school concept. Court decisions have embraced system-wide remedies to break patterns of racial isolation in school systems. In some cases, as in St. Louis, the remedy involves many school systems.

School principals cannot ignore court mandates and judicial remedies to foster racial desegregation. Site- or school-based management precepts must honor court decisions. Magnet schools are one response to racial desegregation within court decisions.

State Testing Mandates. Testing mandates are attempts to achieve congruence regarding a certain body of knowledge or facts. All standardized tests are based on the premise of some commonality in school curriculum offerings. The higher the visibility of the test, the more likelihood that educators will want their students to attain higher scores on the test. A principal or teacher may opt for a curriculum that is not congruent with such a test only at his or her peril. Tests have been and remain strong forces for curricular centralization and uniformity.

Technology. Permitting schools to order their own computers has occasioned an expensive and duplicative system in which machines are not compatible, software cannot be shared, and teachers and students must learn many systems. Most school systems, to their regret, have experienced the expensive mistakes that occur when computer purchasing is totally decentralized, with no thought to common patterns of usage or future technological improvements. Centralization is a way of minimizing these problems.

Taxation and Finance. School districts, not the individual schools within the districts, are taxing agents. If the latter were the case, current inequities would be even greater than now. Richer schools would tax at lower rates than poorer ones. Funds can now be allocated to poorer schools, at least in larger systems. This is precisely the rationale adopted by many state higher courts in declaring per-pupil funding approaches unconstitutional.

Decentralization

System requirements now ensure legal, contractual, curricular, and financial propriety and equity, but some thought can and should be given to the appropriate levels for decisions within these parameters. School principals, for example, may be obligated by a union contract to have a certain number of staff members in a building, but still have flexibility in deploying them within a school schedule.

The guiding principle of site-based management is that the school principal and professional staff members should have the widest possible latitude in determining the human, material, and time allocations needed for learning effectiveness. In few cases would decisions made at the building level be second-guessed. This is a generally accepted military principle. A rear line general rarely countermands a decision made by a battlefield general for the simple reason that the field commander is aware of specific conditions that the behind-the-desk officer cannot know.

When central office administrators attempt to dictate the means and methods for attaining a system's objectives, the advantages of site-based management are lost. One result is that field administrators stop making important decisions. Everything is passed up-

ward. Central office administrators are forced to make decisions principals should be making. Principals must make decisions their teachers should make. Highly centralized systems are easily clogged with trivia. The result is inertia, pessimism, inefficiency, cynicism, and long delays for decisions of any kind on the smallest of matters.

School-based management is an excellent antidote to bureaucracy.

Enabling vs. Empowerment

The purpose of school-site management is to create sufficient building autonomy within the dictates of a larger system to maximize school resources. This would not be necessary if all schools were exactly the same. Patently, they are not.

The larger system grants individual units of the system spheres of autonomy within guidelines to maximize system response. This kind of delegation enables schools to maximize their resources and energies for their local clientele. I distinguish this approach from empowerment, which implies that authority itself is shifted to the school. The implication of empowerment is that the school could veto priorities of the larger system. That would mean the end of school systems. Districts would be nothing more than confederations of schools, crippled in many phases of operation.

Some critics actually mean empowerment when they use the word; i.e., they are convinced that the system itself is the problem. Their arguments are neither persuasive nor conclusive. Commonly accepted good management practice supports the concept of enabling separate units to optimize their resources within defined spheres of autonomy. In education, this is called school-site management.

Setting Up the Process

A school district cannot move overnight from a highly centralized system to one of school-site management. People have learned their jobs in one environment. A different environment might be more productive for them and for students, but new patterns of behavior take time to accept and learn. Old ways are predictable; they represent a form of security.

To begin, principals should thoroughly acquaint themselves with the literature of school-site management. They must recognize that teachers, students, and parents may initially be suspicious, particularly if the new system means more work. They should establish a fairly lengthy time line to initiate dialog about school-site management. Advantages and disadvantages should be frankly discussed. The outer limits of autonomy should be fully probed in such areas as teacher assignment, evaluation, curriculum development, scheduling, grading, and the like.

Before initiating dialog at the building level, the principal must have assurance of the necessary autonomy from the central level. The principal should write down his or her perceptions of the limits of autonomy and the range of decisions acceptable within the larger system. These notes should form the basis of a memorandum of understanding between the principal and the district. This kind of record will prevent misunderstandings at a later time and diminish the likelihood of a central office veto, should conflict arise over issues within the building.

Conflicts will occur and there will be appeals. Appeals to central authority should be anticipated. The memorandum of understanding should define the parameters of this process.

The principal should feel confident in initiating this dialog. The motive behind these efforts is not to abdicate responsibility for school leadership, but to provide larger spheres of autonomy for the professional staff members and to creatively search for and implement new approaches to educational effectiveness. This is an enabling initiative. The principal is not losing power but rather extending initiative to the greatest number of people possible. A person who does that has power of a different sort.

Possible Areas of Action

Several areas are definitely within the sphere of school-site management:

- School scheduling
- Instructional delivery
- Instructional support
- Curricular alternatives
- Student wellness
- School climate
- Parent/community involvement
- Facility cleanliness and security
- Financial priorities.

The principal is the only one who sees the whole school as it functions on a day-to-day basis. Other personnel may see pieces and parts, but no one else has the vantage point to view the entire school. Any problem requiring the coordinated work of individual teachers will ultimately depend upon the one who

coordinates and integrates those efforts. Whether that person is called headmaster, dean, executive secretary, or principal, he or she must be responsive in shaping and directing the enterprise.

Committees cannot be accountable. Individuals can and must be. Principals should not be afraid to open avenues of input and involvement. They run no risk of unemployment.

Let us now briefly review each of the possible SSM areas as they relate to various school constituencies and the range of decisions that can be made.

School Scheduling. The development of a schedule is ultimately the translation of a school's purpose, curriculum, and decisions about grouping into action. Many noble ideas have been lost in the rigidities of a schedule. "It's a great idea but you can't schedule it," is a common defense for the status quo.

The school scheduling innovations of the '60s put an end to this myth. There is literally no end to the ways a school can be scheduled. Widespread use of computers solved the technical problems of scheduling. The five or six-period day remains despite the creative efforts of innovators over five decades to explore and develop alternatives. What persists today is tradition.

Site-based management offers a means to involve staff members, students, and parents in exploring scheduling options and alternatives. Discussions about the purpose of the school, its curricular offerings, its methods of student grouping and teaching modes should precede any scheduling considerations. Decision making should come first instead of being forced by a schedule.

Instructional Delivery and Support. Instruction is what happens when teachers and support staff translate a curriculum into classroom reality. Virtually every aspect of instruction is open to the processes of school-based management within the guidelines established by the larger system. Areas include the selection of methods, teacher team planning, teacher evaluation, grouping of students, use of media and technology, use of student mentors and tutors, use of parent volunteers as aides, etc.

Curricular Alternatives. Curriculum is a system-wide concern in terms of articulation across buildings, but much can be done to personalize and customize curriculum within individual schools. The possibilities include the types of resources used to deliver the curriculum, the program variations permitted within schools or departments, and the availability of remedial offerings or open time for enrichment. To some degree, the kind and quality of electives beyond the basic curriculum can be local options as well.

Student Wellness. "Wellness" programs to assist at-risk students are almost totally dependent upon a strong local response (Ogden and Germinario, 1988). Extensive involvement and input from students, parents, and staff members are necessary to make a wellness program effective in dealing with drugs, alcohol, absenteeism, dropouts, pregnancy, eating disorders, or suicide. Wellness programs must be adapted specifically to a school's population.

School Climate. School climate has historically been a pivotal area of principal influence. Climate is enhanced when staff members, students, and parents become involved in shaping aspects of their own environment. Instrumentation like the NASSP Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) model can enable a school team to analyze the dimensions of the school environment and collaboratively plan appropriate interventions.

Parent/Community Involvement. If parents do not feel welcome at a school, the blame can be laid at the principal's door. Effective schools involve parents in more ways than making cupcakes for the annual bake sale. Meaningful parental involvement creates local ownership and strong support for the school and its mission. The principal must also act as a buffer for the school against harmful community intrusion. A fearful climate is inimical to students, teachers, and parents alike. Site-based management can broaden the useful scope of parent and community involvement.

Facility Cleanliness and Security. A clean, safe building is a prerequisite to making schools productive places for teachers and students. Even old buildings can be attractive, functional, and caring places.

Given today's proliferation of environmental hazards and pupil vandalism, a total school response is the only approach that works. If the principal is the only one picking up paper after lunch, a broader avenue of involvement is necessary. Site-based management can provide the catalyst.

Financial Priorities. School-site management is greatly facilitated if the school system budget permits the tracking of program dollars by schools. Local customizing takes money. Principals held to a rigid line-item budget will have difficulty finding funds to support local decisions.

Even if the system budget will not provide a detailed breakdown, the principal can still create a customized approach within the traditional process. A "cross-walk" or "hybrid" budget can take the allocated

dollars and relate them differently. As long as the total budget is not increased and can be reconciled within the central system's format, principals should be free to develop better categories and tracking procedures to support local efforts.

A Suggested Strategy

The following strategy will lead to implementation of school-site management at your school.

Decision 1: Identify Key Shareholders in Your School

Meet with several other professionals, students, and parents to identify the key people and groups that should be involved in establishing a school-site approach to management.

Decision 2: Form an Advisory Committee

Organize an advisory committee to establish guidelines, define the school's mission, and chart strategy.

Decision 3: Develop a Plan To Present to the District

Use the data (and people) from your earlier decisions to develop an SSM action plan for your building. The plan should identify what will be done, by whom and when, over a three to five-year period. Present the plan to district officials for their approval. Be sure that the sphere of autonomous action is understood by all parties, especially if the school intends to deviate significantly from the practices or traditions of the larger system.

Decision 4: Build Support and Make Incremental Changes

Institutionalized change must be built slowly to ensure real support and involvement and to avoid the kind of cosmetic alterations that do not significantly affect school operation.

Decision 5: Insist on Openness and Candor in Evaluating the Effects

The principal must insist on a full evaluation of site-based management efforts. A broad-based process will ensure better decisions. Candor will enable staff members to solve real problems and to implement changes that will make a difference. Openness will mean that errors, mistakes, or problems will be addressed with a minimum of defensiveness and a maximum of support.

Decision 6: Practice Patience and Deliberation

School-site management is not a "quick fix." Neither is it flashy or convenient. SSM means many more people are working with the principal, so decisions take longer. The principal should caution against the promise of too much too soon. It may take quite a while to see results in the traditional sense of improved student test scores and grades. Climate will change first and business-as-usual in the school. These changes are process oriented. Output changes can also be expected, but will take longer.

TO ILLUSTRATE

More than anything else, school-site management is a philosophy of governing and a way of thinking about governance. School-site management is not an artifact like a budget or a schedule. A school does not have it so much as it goes about doing it. There is nothing to buy. No one can sell it to you like a new computer. Rather, the principal and administrative team decide to change the way the school works and how people in the school work together. That is the critical decision. The principal remains the prime mover and the key person who can spell success or failure.

Several programs that are working now will illustrate the concept.

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The Kenmore-Tonawanda school-site management project is now in its seventh year. The effort is organized around school improvement and building on excellence. The key strategy is the development of administrative support groups. The basic goals are classroom impact (to benefit students and help them grow) and personal and professional development (to benefit adults working with students and help them grow).

The Kenmore-Tonawanda efforts center around nine principles.

1. Education is geared to prepare students for successful life transitions.
2. Schools make every effort to link students with community resources that can make a positive contribution to their education.
3. Students become increasingly self-directed through planned activities that anticipate a self-educating adulthood.
4. Schools teach and reward the agreed-upon values of the school and community.

5. Parents are expected to be active participants in the education of their children.
6. Each student pursues excellence in an area of his or her own choosing.
7. Every person affected by a decision is involved directly or representatively in its making.
8. Schools strive to integrate the educational efforts of home, school, and community.
9. Every participant models the role of learner.

The Kenmore-Tonawanda school improvement program operates on a systematic planning cycle. The steps in the cycle are shown below.

Planning Activity	Time Allotted
1. Awareness meetings	3 months
2. Intensive planning retreat	2 days
3. Design stage	3 months
4. Inservice and evaluation	2-6 months
5. Implementation and recycling	6-12 months

Each cycle activity is capped by the production of a document or the engagement in a critical process. The product at the end of the intensive planning retreat, for example, is the development of a long-range vision for the school. The vision statement below was developed by Kenmore East Senior High School:

"To promote academic excellence by providing each student with the best educational opportunities possible. In a caring, cooperative atmosphere, each student will be encouraged by professional and enthusiastic staff to achieve and grow to his or her maximum potential."

Minutes taken in administrative support groups in June 1989 include these words of advice:

- "Keep decentralizing—the school as the unit is a key."
- "We don't know where we might end up."
- "Time—take enough time!"
- "We learned together—we need to keep growing."

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West Potomac High School began its SSM thrust in fall 1988 with the establishment of a school team, called the Effective School Committee (ESC). This team, made up of representatives from the teaching faculty, student government, guidance staff, department chairmen, and substance abuse committee, spent a week outside the school to begin planning, developing, and establishing a school mission. The ESC, with the assistance of several consultants, was able to define goals, objectives, action plans, and methods of evaluation. The Committee has continued to meet at two-week intervals throughout the school year.

The ESC recently completed a two-day workshop in which several important decisions were reached:

- Teachers and parents will elect their own representatives to the Committee.
- School support staff will be invited to participate, as appropriate.
- Action committees will be formed to carry out the tasks of the ESC.

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